

PROSPECT,

OR

View of the Moral World,

BY ELIHU PALMER.

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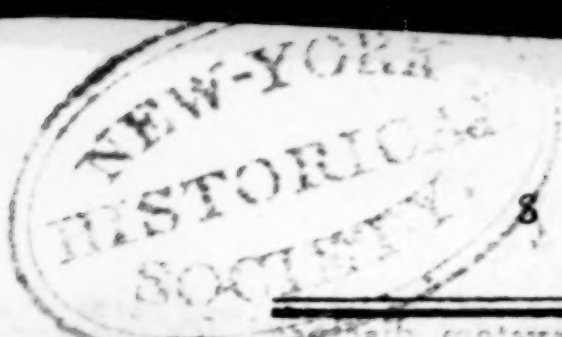
No. I.

TO THE PUBLIC.

THE period has at length arrived in which the civilized world has recognized the necessity of moral principles to regulate the conduct of intelligent beings. If the principles be necessary, there also exists an equal necessity of diffusing through the mass of society a clear knowledge of their nature and character. Ignorance is the parent of vice, and vice the destruction of social order and happiness. In marching retrogressively over the historic page of man, the mind perceives with extreme regret, the immoral copartnership existing between superstition, vice, and ignorance; the testimony of past ages rises up in judgment against the flagrant crimes, the horrid murders, and the wide spreading devastations which have resulted from superstition, claiming social intercourse with celestial powers. The purity of every theological system must be marked by the purity of its moral precepts, and in deficiency of this consideration, it forfeits all just pretention to human credence and respect: the tenacious adherents of superstition, however, assert that their system is not only divine, but moral, pure, and excellent in all its essential principles. If this be a fact believers should be among the last to decide against the severest scrutiny and the boldest investigation into the origin and character of their theological opinions. Whatever is divine is true, and will pass safely the intellectual ordeal of individuals, nations, and ages. It should be presumed then that the friends of christianity would rejoice in a periodical publication of this kind; because the triumph must be abundantly theirs, since by their own confession, heaven and the christian part of the earth, at least, have united in defence of the immaculate doctrines contained in the old and new testaments; but whether the advocates of revelation will concede this much to the moral rights of man, is not an essential

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point of enquiry. We claim it as a right, and accordingly shall exercise it in this publication, in conformity to the constitutions of our country, and the independent properties of intellectual existence. Different sections of the globe, have been subjected to the influence of different theological systems; and the sacred books of these primary divisions, are said to contain unequivocally the will of those supernatural beings to whom in so many different forms human adoration has been paid. The first great object of this publication is to awaken the efforts of the understanding, to take a clear and comprehensive view of the conflicting opinions by which the world has been agitated. Christian theology in particular will become a prominent object of attention—the discussions upon this subject will be free, open, and bold; but at the same time we affirm that they shall be managed with decency and mingled with a suitable respect for the opinions of every christian sectary. Truth unquestionably claims our highest regard, but since mind differs from mind in intellectual decisions, beings of the same species owe to each other a moral and scientific civility in all their theological and philosophical enquiries. A rancorous spirit of malignity can never serve the cause of truth or virtue,—the friend of both should investigate without fear, discuss with tranquility, and decide with firmness. But it is not to the examination of religious subjects alone that this paper will be confined;—it opens itself also to the reception of all moral, philosophical, and literary productions, useful to society, and calculated to augment the science and happiness of human life. We respectfully invite the reflecting and philosophic mind, to contribute towards the embellishment and utility of this periodical publication. Communications from scientific or thoughtful men in any part of the world, received post paid, will find insertion in this paper, if the matter which they contain bear relation to the cause of truth, virtue, and human happiness.



COMPETENCY OF THE HUMAN POWERS.

REASON PROSCRIBED BY SUPERSTITION.

A SURVEY of the infancy of man and of the imbecilities to which he is subjected, seems to form in some measure an objection against the admission of an opinion pre-eminently important in the general improvement of the world. If superstition be permitted to depreciate human energy and calumniate its character for activity, it will by this coalition, with native weakness, form an insurmountable barrier to the progress of knowledge among the nations of the earth. The strength of our faculties is diminished by fear or augmented by moral encouragements, when impressions are frequently made unfavorable to the right as well as the real exercise of rational powers; it creates in individuals a consciousness, or rather a belief of self-insufficiency. This becomes the generating cause of a thousand subsequent mischiefs; for when a man is once impressed with an idea that he is either weak or foolish, or that it is a crime to bring his faculties, small as they are, to bear upon the high sounding topics of theological doctrines, he trembles at the idea of intellectual efforts, and cries out in the language of revealed theology, *Lord, what is man!* It is a point of policy in the hierarchy to cherish this submissive temperament, and cultivate in the soul of man the divine virtue of humility. If the enemies of truth and free discussion upon religious subjects, have discovered an interest in human degradation, philosophers and philanthropists have recognized in the exaltation of human power, man restored to his true dignity and in the full possession of those moral pleasures to which his nature and his station in existence furnish so indisputable a claim; the zeal and exertions of great and good men during the last century, were directed to the important subject of giving a new elevation to the powers of man; they directed him to contemplate his organization, to mark the slow but certain expansion of his faculties, to take a retrospective and comparative view of what he was in early life, and what relation his intellectual properties bore to the whole visible universe. In this train of instruction and reflection, he learnt duly to appreciate the energies of his existence, he saw the whole moral and physical world subjected to the electric movements of mind, the revolution of the planets were calculated, their relative distances and magnitudes ascertained, and the uni-

versal harmony of the solar system disclosed for the contemplation of an astonished world! But the full recognition of human competency did not result solely from these splendid and majestic facts;—another circle of science more circumscribed it is true, but more important to the real interests of society, gave fresh testimony in favor of the strength and all-sufficiency of our mental powers. The double despotism of the world had taught man the shameful maxim that his mind and body might be rightfully held in subjection by others; the power of thought revived the discriminative considerations essential to moral science, and society witnessed a new æra in the history of its existence. The rules, principles, laws, customs, and constitutions necessary to peace and social happiness, were demonstrated to result from the inherent character, and to be essentially interwoven with the rational constitution of intelligent beings. Superstition declared that man could accomplish nothing; experience taught him that he could accomplish every thing necessary to his real felicity, and that if it were not for the institutions of supernatural theology, he might have seen himself surrounded with more comforts, and his life abundantly more tranquil.—When reason, the highest and noblest faculty of man, asserted the right of moral decision upon questions of vast importance, the church and its coadjutors issued a writ of proscription and combined ecclesiastical and military power for the completion of their iniquitous design. The history of the church in Europe furnishes ample verification to this remark. Gallileo, who only asserted that the earth is round, together with an hundred other philosophers bold in the cause of truth, suffered imprisonment or death under the vindictive cruelty of clerical domination. But if St. Paul, who is a great stickler for the incapacity of man, for he says of *ourselves we can do nothing*, together with thousands of adherents to christianity, should labour to demonstrate the incompetency of human powers, let it be remembered that the period is past for this doctrine to obtain celebrity—the realization of the fact is an ample refutation to such destructive calumnies. The arts, the sciences, all the comforts of human life, bear testimony to the solemn truth, and if we still suffer evils the fault is our own—it ought not to be charged upon nature or nature's God.

SUPERSTITIOUS TERRORS.

THE ingenuity which has been employed by religious zealots to produce a commanding influence over human sensation, is testimony in favor of an opinion which has been advanced,—that some of the greatest fanatics of the world, have possessed a clear knowledge of the movements and passions of the human heart. Whether conceding this much to the comprehensive views of religious fanatics will appreciate in any great degree the purity of motive or moral integrity, by which man ought to be influenced, is a question which seeks for solution in the silent and internal operations of the mind. It is difficult however to believe that a correct organization, united with extensive intellectual information, can be destitute of those conscious feelings which induce acts of justice and benevolence. The child from his infancy is placed under terrific apprehensions concerning malignant powers of a supernatural kind. If he were taught the plain maxims of justice, the love of truth, and an utter abhorrence to all the rancorous sentiments inculcated by the voice of superstition, he would rise in purity of morals and dignity of character, far superior to all the specimens of talents and of virtues which the church has furnished through a long succession of ages.

EXTRACT

From J. Stewart's Great Essay to Systematize the Moral World.

LET the bigot who would burn a fellow being at the stake, for not prostrating himself before a wafer, as Supreme Creator of the universe, travel among the Siamese and listen to their opinion, that the universe is one great body tending to promote its own good by the instrumentality of its parts, which are all eternal atoms co-equal, co-essential, co-interested, in all good and evil, in time and futurity, and therefore the best adoration which they can pay to infinite intelligence, must consist in the developement of their different energies for the important purpose of augmenting good, and diminishing evil, through the whole mass of existence; let this bigot if he is not convinced by this new matter of comparison and evidence, travel into India and observe the

excruciating penance of the Bramin, burning the living body between two fires, to conciliate the favor of an idol, which he made with his own hands, the day before his torture; if he still demands new points of comparison to detect his bigotry, let him observe in every part of the world, where he extends his travels, inspired ideots who pretend to commune with supernatural beings, uttering imprecations against each other's tenets and burning schismatics at opposite stakes, and if this ultimate demonstration of human imbecility does not cure his bigotry, he would do well to offer himself to the hospital of incurable lunatics, for reason could give him no relief!!!

That Polytheism was the primary Religion of Man.

IT appears to me, that, if we consider the improvement of human society, from rude beginnings to a state of greater perfection, polytheism or idolatry was, and necessarily must have been, the first and most ancient religion of mankind. This opinion I shall endeavour to confirm by the following arguments.

It is a matter of fact incontestible, that about 1700 years ago all mankind were polytheists. The doubtful and sceptical principles of a few philosophers, or the theism, and that too not entirely pure, of one or two nations, form no objection worth regarding. Behold then the clear testimony of history. The farther we mount up into antiquity, the more do we find mankind plunged into polytheism. No marks, no symptoms of any more perfect religion. The most ancient records of human race still present us with that system as the popular and established creed. The north, the south, the east, the west, give their unanimous testimony to the same fact. What can be opposed to so full an evidence?

As far as writing or history reaches, mankind, in ancient times appear universally to have been polytheists. Shall we assert, that, in more ancient times, before the knowledge of letters, or the discovery of any art or science, men entertained the principles of pure theism? That is, while they were ignorant and barbarous, they discovered truth: But fell into error, as soon as they acquired learning and politeness.

But in this assertion you not only contradict all appearance of probability, but also our present experience concerning

the principles and opinions of barbarous nations. The savage tribes of AMERICA, AFRICA, and ASIA are all idolaters. Not a single exception to this rule. Insomuch, that, were a traveller to transport himself into any unknown region; if he found inhabitants cultivated with arts and science, though even upon that supposition there are odds, against their being theists, yet could he not safely, till farther inquiry, pronounce any thing on that head: But if he found them ignorant and barbarous, he might beforehand declare them idolaters; and there scarcely is a possibility of his being mistaken.

It seems certain, that, according to the natural progress of human thought, the ignorant multitude must first entertain some groveling and familiar notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. We may as reasonably imagine, that men inhabited palaces before huts and cottages, or studied geometry before agriculture; as assert that the Deity appeared to them a pure spirit, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, before he was apprehended to be a powerful, though limited being, with human passions and appetites, limbs, and organs. The mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior: By abstracting from what is imperfect, it forms an idea of perfection: and slowly distinguishing the nobler parts of its own frame from the grosser, it learns to transfer only the former, much elevated and refined, to its divinity. Nothing could disturb this natural progress of thought, but some obvious and invincible argument, which might immediately lead the mind into the pure principles of theism, and make it overleap, at one bound, the vast interval which is interposed between the human and the divine nature. But though I allow, that the order and frame of the universe, when accurately examined, affords such an argument; yet I can never think, that this consideration could have an influence on mankind, when they formed their first rude notions of religion.

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